

FOIA Processing Toolkit: Building and Using A Flow Board

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About the Toolkit

Toolkit's Purpose: This toolkit provides FOIA practitioners with best practices and tools to measure and streamline their FOIA processes. The toolkit was conceptualized at the February 2018 Lean FOIA Kaizen event, created by the Office of Air and Radiation's Lean FOIA program, and tested by the Lean FOIA Response Project team.

Toolkit Scope: The toolkit covers how to track and measure processing from the time a request is assigned to a FOIA professional through to the request's closeout.

Background: Launched in 2018, the Lean FOIA Response project is part of the EPA Lean Management System (ELMS). ELMS's management philosophy focuses on identifying and solving problems so that our agency can increase performance and better accomplish its mission.

EPA's FY'19 FOIA Goals: EPA leadership set goals for improving EPA FOIA administration. By September 30, 2019 - the end of fiscal year 2019 - the agency is committed to processing FOIA requests as follows,

- Complete 90% of simple requests in 20 business days
- Complete 50% of complex request in 30 business days
- Complete 75% of negotiated deadline requests by agreed dates

Resources:

- **EPA Lean Management System**
 - EPA Lean Management System <https://intranet.epa.gov/oci/elms/index.html>
 - EPA Lean Program <https://intranet.epa.gov/oci/lean/index.html>
 - FY 2018 -2022 EPA Strategic Plan <https://www.epa.gov/sites/production/files/2018-02/documents/fy-2018-2022-epa-strategic-plan.pdf>
 - EPA FY18-22 Transformation Strategy <https://intranet.epa.gov/oci/docs/strategic-measures-glance.pdf>
- **FOIA Statute and Regulations**
 - [FOIA, 5 U.S.C. § 552](#)
 - [FOIA Regs, 40 CFR 1\(A\) Part 2](#)

ELMS FOIA processing is defined by five standard steps: Triage, Collection, Review, Production(s), and Closeout.

Seemingly out of place in our digitized world, analog data visualization - created with tape, paper and markers - is a vital key to FOIA process improvement. Creating the flow board tool on your office walls provides two elements critical to successful ELMS project management:

- ## Building and Using a Flow Board

The second row represents standard activities with each step. The green and red bars on the left signal whether a FOIA is on time or behind schedule.

To represent each FOIA request on the board, multiple paper sheets, known as proxy cards, are clipped together to keep track of the request. Requests may sit in multiple steps at one time. For instance, when a request has multiple production sets, some documents may be in first-line review and others may be in final awareness review. We represent this lateral activity by placing the entire group of sheets for the request will be placed in the farthest-along step.

[illegible]

Review Process

1. **Triage:** Request has been submitted to the triage team via FOIAonline and is awaiting assignment.
 - a. **Pending Requester:** The team contacts the requester for clarification and is awaiting response.
 - b. **In Process:** Triage team receives request and it does not need to be clarified further. OAR is determining where the records are located and how they will be collected.
2. **Document Collection:** Request is submitted to eDiscovery or documents are collected from Subject Matter Experts. Hardcopy material may also be collected and scanned.
3. **Document Review Setup:** Coordinate with Ediscovery Division to create the relativity workspace. If documents are printed to a PDF or are in hard copy, scan and set-up review accordingly.
4. **First-Line Review:** Reviewers evaluate batches of documents for responsiveness and disposition. Reviewers apply redactions, marking equities where applicable.
5. **Equity Review:** Documents marked for equity review are sent to relevant subject matter experts, program offices, or other federal agencies prior to being included in a document production.
6. **Production:** Accrue enough reviewed documents to create a production set.
 - a. **Action Office:** Production set is sent to senior staff for their final review.
 - b. **Printing:** If documents are in Relativity, request is sent to e-Discovery to print the production set.
 - c. **Awareness Notification:** If the FOIA is flagged in FOIAonline, an email is sent out to senior management to make them aware of the planned release. This email is sent simultaneously with the printing request.
 - d. **Interim and Final Releases:** Upload production set to FOIAonline and released to requester.
7. **Closeout:** Closeout letter is sent to the requester when all production sets have been released.

Timelines

Beneath each step, there is an estimate of the cycle time for each response. Use these time frames when setting deadlines within each step. To remind you;

- **Simple Requests** are statutorily allowed 20 business days from perfection to closeout
- **Complex Requests** are statutorily allowed 30 business days from perfection to closeout
- **Negotiated Requests** are allowed production dates agreed to by the requestor

OAR's Flow and Performance Board

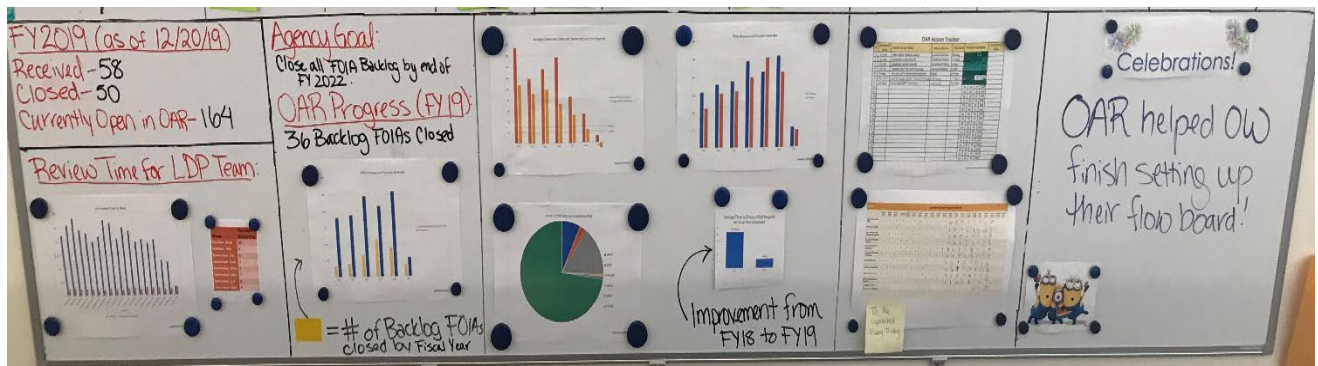


Performance Board

The bottom half of the flow board shows OAR's FOIA performance board.

The Performance Board section displays:

- Number of requests received and closed for the fiscal year to date
- Total hours worked on FOIA each week by the large document production team
- Progress on the agency's goal of eliminating the FOIA backlog by the end of FY 2022
- Graphics displaying the team's progress in processing FOIAs since FY2014
- Action item and issue trackers
- Team accomplishments



Close-Up of OAR's Performance Board

Printed graphics are updated monthly, and the team member who updates the graphics includes the date of the most recent update at the bottom of the printed graphics. Hand-written metrics (e.g., requests received, closed, and open FY to date) are updated weekly.

Adding a request to the flow board

Each request (or group of similar requests) is represented by a green sheet, also called a proxy card, on the flow board. When a new request comes in, a new green sheet will be added to the flow board “Triage” column.

When either a document collection request is submitted, or the documents are collected from another source, the proxy card moves to the next step in the FOIA process. When document collection is complete, and a relativity workspace is created, add the Relativity ED number to the sheet for easy identification in Relativity.

Name: <input type="text"/>		
FOIA #: <input type="text"/>		
ED#: <input type="text"/>		
	Requested	Actual
Triage	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Document Collection	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
1 st Line Review	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Closeout	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
Flagged <input type="checkbox"/>		
Case Manager: <input type="text"/>		

Shortened name for the FOIA, typically referenced by keywords and name of the requester for more common topics. (i.e., CPP E&E News)

FOIA Number

E-Discovery Number (for Relativity)

The date that the step is “due”

The date that the step was completed

The FOIA is flagged in FOIAonline and therefore requires the additional step of awareness notification

The team member who is managing the case and review process

As the request moves through the process, sheets to track different components of the process will be attached, with a paperclip, to the green sheet.

The sheet displayed at the top of the compiled sheets should indicate the furthest step in the process that the request is in. Leave the top section of the green sheet visible to easily identify the request.

Name:		
FOIA #:		
ED#:		
Name:		
Batch #	Requested	Actual
Flagged <input type="checkbox"/>		
Case Manager:		

Name:		
FOIA #:		
ED#:		
	Requested	Actual
Name:		
Equity Office(s)	Requested	Actual
Flagged <input type="checkbox"/>		
Case Manager:		

Name:		
FOIA #:		
ED#:		
Name:		
Production#:		
	Requested	Actual
OAR IO		
Printing	Sent:	Received:
Awareness Notification		
Production Release		
Case Manager:		

Tracking review batches

If the FOIA has multiple review batches for which you set up deadlines for reviewers, attach a review batch tracking sheet. This is the small light blue sheet pictured below. This helps to track a long first-line review process.

Name:		
Batch #	Requested	Actual

Tracking equity review

If other offices have equities in reviewed documents, as indicated in Relativity, attach an equity review tracking sheet. This is the yellow sheet pictured below.

Equity is defined as offices with staff who are document custodians; have authored portions of the document; or who have subject matter expertise. Those offices should conduct a higher-level review of documents to ensure proper redactions.

Name:		
Equity Office(s)	Requested	Actual

Tracking production sets

When you have collected enough reviewed records to create a production set, attach a production tracking sheet. This is the blue sheet pictured below.

Each production may need to be reviewed by your immediate office. If the records were processed in Relativity, send the e-Discovery team a request to print the documents (record the sent and received dates for this set as noted on the sheet).

If the request is flagged in FOIAonline for Awareness Notification, send the production for Awareness Notification on the same day that the production request is made.

Production release indicates the date the records were sent to the requester.

Name:	Production#:	
	Requested	Actual
OAR IO		
Printing	Sent:	Received:
Awareness Notification		
Production Release		

Reading the Flow Board

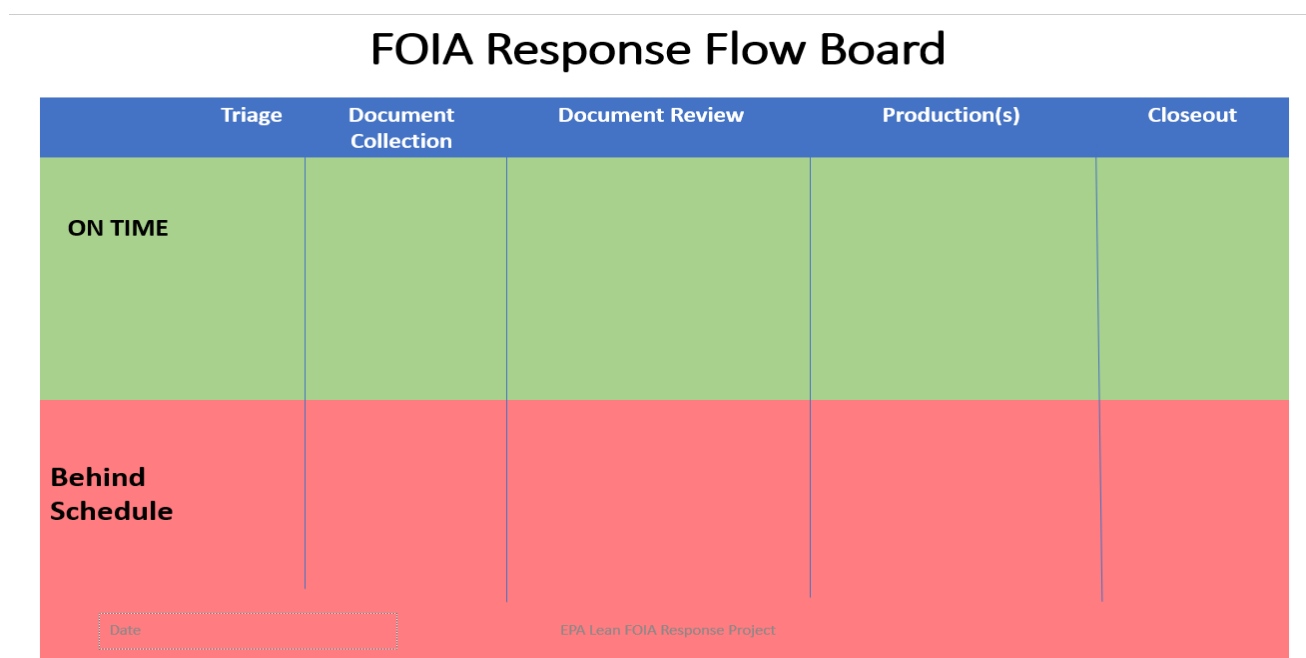
Seeing the Big Picture

The board displays,

- where your FOIA requests are in the five-step response process (columns)
- whether each FOIA request is on time or behind schedule (rows)

Showing FOIA Timeliness

The board is split horizontally into red and green zones. The colors extend across the board and every request falls within either the green/on-time zone or the red/behind schedule zone.



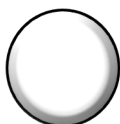
Other components of the flow board

Congressional oversight requests



When a FOIA is flagged as having overlapping records with a congressional oversight request, a blue dot sticker is added to the request's green sheet. When a production set is released to FOIAonline, OCIR is notified so they can pass along the release.

Interagency consultation



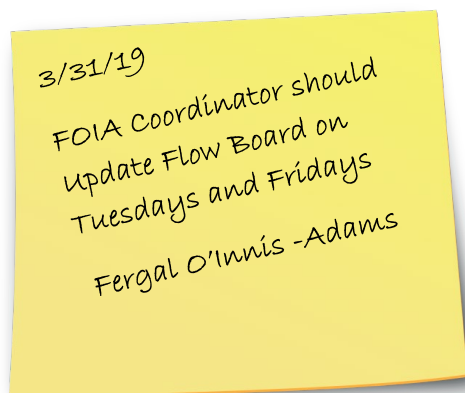
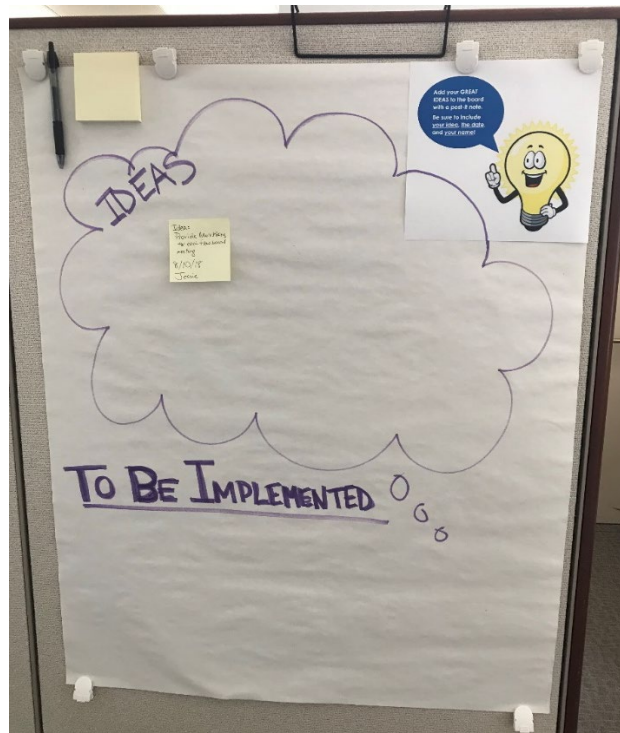
When documents are flagged as containing other federal agency equities, they are submitted for consultation to the relevant federal agencies. Requests that have records out for inter-agency review are indicated with a white dot. The dot is removed after the process is complete.

Idea board

Consider placing an idea board near your flow board. The idea board provides a place for team members to share process improvement ideas.

How To

- Keep it simple: a piece of craft paper, stickies, and a pen is all you need.
- Team members write ideas on sticky notes and place them in the “dialogue bubble”.
- Evaluate ideas weekly, create tasks, move tasked items the bottom of the board under the “To Be Implemented” section.
- At the end of each quarter, check process of tasked items.
- Celebrate completed tasks!



Each sticky note added to the Idea Board should contain:

- Date submitted
- Brief description of the idea
- Name of individual who submitted the idea